On-demand Food Delivery: Emerging Realities in Thailand's Platform-Mediated Work

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and Woradul Tularak

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Foreword

Digital platforms have transformed the world of work over the past decade. The Covid-19 pandemic has further increased the demand for online services and enabled leading platforms to further expand their businesses. Millions of workers seem to find jobs easily and to enjoy more independence compared to formally employed workers. Workers who have lost their formal jobs often seek work in the platform economy. Informal-sector workers welcome the new job opportunities. However, labour-rights advocates emphasize the lack of decent working conditions in the new world of work: Platform work is usually of temporary nature, not covered by labour protection laws, with low income and long working hours. In most cases, the workers find themselves in bogus formal positions, or disguised self-employment. The platforms, while acting as the real employers on many levels, deny their responsibility and have not been regulated to ensure workers' protection.

This study presents the results of some primary research on Thailand's on-demand food delivery platforms and its workers. It is a follow-up to an introduction to platform-based work in Thailand, published in 2018. Both studies were conducted by the Just Economy and Labor Institute (JELI) and supported by FES Thailand. The authors provide in-depth information on employment relations, analyze key actors and their business strategies, explore the mostly precarious working conditions, and recommend much-needed policy changes: on the legal status of riders, their organizing ability and collective bargaining power, on increased responsibility and accountability of platform companies and on steps to better health and safety.

Our hope is that the study will trigger further debate and policy changes not only for riders, but for workers in other sectors too. We hope that other think tanks, NGOs, trade unions, government offices, platform businesses, academic community, media and all relevant persons will join us in promoting social justice in the platform economy.

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Just Economy and Labor Institute

Bangkok, December 2020

Executive summary

On-Demand Food Delivery: Emerging Realities in Thailand's Platform-Mediated Work is an in-depth follow-up to the research project, *Platform Economy and the Impacts on Service Workers: Case Studies of Thailand,* published (in Thai) in 2018. Both projects were conducted by researchers from the Just Economy and Labor Institute and funded by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. The first study raised concerns over the nature and impacts of the on-demand food-delivery practices on workers' rights by using case studies of emerging platforms, such as Uber in Thailand. The pilot project focused on the new employment relationships and resulting workers' experiences, giving us a glimpse into the rapidly changing world of work, with the changes fuelled by the growth of the gig economy and lack of regulations.

This recent research is similarly based on a central question: How do on-demand food-delivery platforms, as both a business model and technological instrument, impact on the nature of work and the relationships between the work and the workers? Among other updates, this research differs from the previous report in foregrounding the roles of consumption and technology. We document how digital applications draw consumers into a "supervisory" role over the delivery workers. The researchers argue that food-delivery platforms should be seen as labour brokerage that provides consumers and restaurant clients with delivery *labour power.*

The research introduces conceptual frameworks, particularly platforms as labour brokerage and the business ecosystem of food-delivery platforms, with the aim to help readers approach the platform and gig economy from a holistic perspective—rather than isolating labour platforms from the wider network of actors and businesses (restaurants, suppliers, distributors, consumers) in which they are embroiled in exchanges. If we view platforms as labour brokers, the controversial statement that platform companies are the de facto employers of those who perform services via their platforms should become widely and undeniably accepted.

We also provide readers with a snapshot of on-demand food-delivery platforms in Thailand. As readers will see, capital and purchasing power in the Thai food industry are highly concentrated in terms of geography and business control. The food sector makes up around 23 per cent of the gross domestic product. This is partly because average household expenses for food and drink account for up to a third of total expenses, with expenses for ready-made food ordered to consume at home particularly sizeable in Bangkok and periphery areas. As well, food is a sector dominated by a small number of large conglomerates, such that seven major brands are worth more than the value of more than 1,920 limited companies combined. On-demand food delivery recently gained much attention from these large retailers, and they are now major players, putting considerable investment to connect food-delivery platforms with traditional distribution channels.

Given the lack of research on Thailand's food-delivery platforms, limited access to corporate data and the fast-changing nature of the industry, we complement the fragmented picture by giving examples of food-delivery platforms in China, whose economy is more sizable and developed and may indicate what lays ahead for Thailand. For example, the Chinese example suggests trends of decreasing income for workers employed by food-delivery platforms as well as rising occupational and health risks, such as accidents, collective action and labour disputes.

A major section of this report illustrates the functioning of food-delivery platforms and their methods for controlling workers. We argue that food-delivery platforms generally combine at least four important strategies to create a new precarious work regime. One, food-delivery platforms have mainstreamed a new business model by incorporating outsourcing into the employer–employee relationships. Two, by permanently creating excess supply in the market, the platforms benefit from a constant tendency to race to the bottom in wages. Three, by using digital applications and unintelligible algorithms to allocate work and assign tasks, platforms use asymmetric information to mitigate conflicts between platform companies and food-delivery riders. At the same time,

consumers are drawn into the role of work supervisor. Finally, by employing a complex and opaque system of calculating compensation, incentives and penalties, platforms lure workers into performing mentally loaded tasks and long working hours with excitement and constant challenges—what scholars call the "gamification of work". We also found that compensation tends to decrease over time, a result that echoes studies on gig workers elsewhere.

Lastly, we discuss working conditions and procedures of task performance from the perspective of riders. The city, now becoming the new workplace for food-delivery riders, provides a hostile and dangerous working environment with a lack of rest space. On top of this risky environment, food-delivery riders must accustom themselves with a high degree of uncertainty. For instance, daily working conditions vary due to many uncontrollable factors: climate and traffic conditions, fluctuation of orders and competition, etc. Therefore, platform-mediated work is unstable by default. Moreover, a rider's income is largely determined by incentive schemes that regularly change as well. The risky, uncertain and precarious work environment has a direct impact and takes its toll on workers' health. For example, pressured by the need to maximize delivery trips, riders are constantly faced with an urge to travel with speed. With the average rider working longer than 8 or 10 hours per day, exhausted riders face a high risk of accidents.

Despite these dire conditions, platform companies offer few support systems for food-delivery riders. Such evident lack of support has motivated riders to get together and informally self-organize. The activities of mutual aid groups include, for instance, information sharing, new rider training by veteran riders and fundraising to support families of riders in the event of an accident or death—for which companies often deny responsibility. Finally, in terms of skilling, we found that food-delivery riders do not necessarily develop new tangible skills from using a digital application beyond reading maps and performing repetitive tasks. For example, experienced riders suggest that common income-maximizing strategies entail identifying popular restaurants with optimal travel routes to maximize the number of trips performed and achieve the highest income. Because platform-mediated food-delivery work is largely dictated by unintelligible algorithms, riders often find themselves frustrated and powerless despite attempting to take control of their work situation.

Just Economy and Labor Institute
December 2019

Chapter 1
Conceptual framework and methodology

This introductory chapter presents basic conceptual tools necessary for understanding labour platforms as a new mechanism for organizing production and consumption. Proponents of the gig economy[1] often tap into the power of compelling ideas, such as "the digital revolution", "new consumerism" and "disruptive innovation" to explain its marvels. While these concepts help contextualize the advent of the platform economy, it is worth emphasizing right at the start that they are not neutral concepts but political discourses that can be deployed to justify the business transitions and concomitant loss of livelihoods. In other words, they serve as both the pretext and justification for the inevitability of the platform economy. We discuss these concepts simply and concisely. In addition, we also introduce less widely known concepts, such as the business ecosystem, which is crucial for understanding the holistic business model that surrounds food-delivery platforms.

1.1 Research methods and ethics

Between March and September 2019, our researchers collected primary data mainly by using qualitative methods together with desk research. In that desk research, the researchers focused on reviewing studies, analyses and news reports covering the policies of relevant platforms. In chapter 2, we provide statistical data on the Thai food and restaurant sector and the on-demand food-delivery platform economy. Although we provide as much detail as the data allowed, we encourage readers to bear in mind that this is a dynamic economy. Given the lack of information publicly available, it is difficult to draw a clear picture of food-delivery platforms in Thailand. We complement the data with analysis derived from the literature as well as responses from workers.

As for the qualitative data collection, our researchers conducted in-depth interviews with food-delivery workers (henceforth referred to as riders) in two ways. First, they conducted focus group and individual interviews with riders in Bangkok as well as phone interviews with riders in Chiang Mai. Over several months, the researchers maintained a relationship with a total of 20 riders, among whom two were based in Chiang Mai. Generally, they gained access to the riders through informal leaders of self-organized food-delivery rider groups in Bangkok. Through online social media, such as Facebook messenger, our researchers reached out to the group leaders and explained the purpose of the research before asking for interviews at their usual meeting places.

We also gained access to random food-delivery riders through a social network of non-government organizations (such as NGOs working on urban issues) as well as rider groups whose names and information publicly appeared in the media. These two sources served as a starting point for snowball sampling. For instance, the researchers were recommended to contact an NGO volunteer who worked as a food-delivery rider and had a large network in urban communities. After the researchers interviewed the volunteer, the volunteer introduced them to another rider, friend or colleague and so forth. Finally, the research team interviewed business associates who provided supplementary information on the operations of food-delivery platforms. The interviewees included the middle management of telecommunications companies and the former president of a trade union for a fast food chain.

It is important to acknowledge three major restrictions in accessing information regarding on-demand food-delivery platforms and riders. One, it is a rapidly changing sector, with a high degree of volatility, competition and dynamism. Public information about the operations and workforce of the companies behind active platforms was scant. Two, owing to the nature of food-delivery services, riders were usually scattered around the city. This geographic constraint

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1   We use the terms "gig economy" and "platform' economy" interchangeably, although they have different emphases: the former on the nature of job, the latter on the technological and management side.

made it difficult to identify and access riders, compared with conventional workers with physical workplaces or established unions as a focal point. A final caveat is that at the time of the research, on-demand food-delivery gigs were considered highly remunerated. In fear of reprisal, the riders are generally cautious about participating in any activity that could jeopardize their livelihood, especially because digital platforms allocate work in a system that is opaque. To protect the riders, identifying information is generally anonymous throughout this report.

1.2 Definition of labour platforms

We find it useful to define food-delivery platforms as a form of labour brokerage. As defined by Collier et al. (2017), "Labour, or labour-brokerage, platforms are those that cyber-coordinate the market of a service worker and a requester of work for a defined task or project. The task or project may last anywhere from a few minutes to several weeks." A labour platform serves as a "brokerage or broker" that matches the demand for and supply of labour. But we are talking about the demand for and supply of labour power, not *a service*. This definition helps us understand the intrinsic roles and responsibilities of the labour platform as well as employment relationships between the labour platform and workers. In the case of on-demand food-delivery platforms, if we consider the role of platforms as simply matching the demand and supply of food-delivery services, we could be misled into thinking that users or customers of the platform are the employers of these workers. By emphasizing the demand and supply of labour, we clearly see that customers are simply buying food-delivery service. It is the labour platform itself that buys labour power from the riders, who then provide the customers with the service of delivering food.
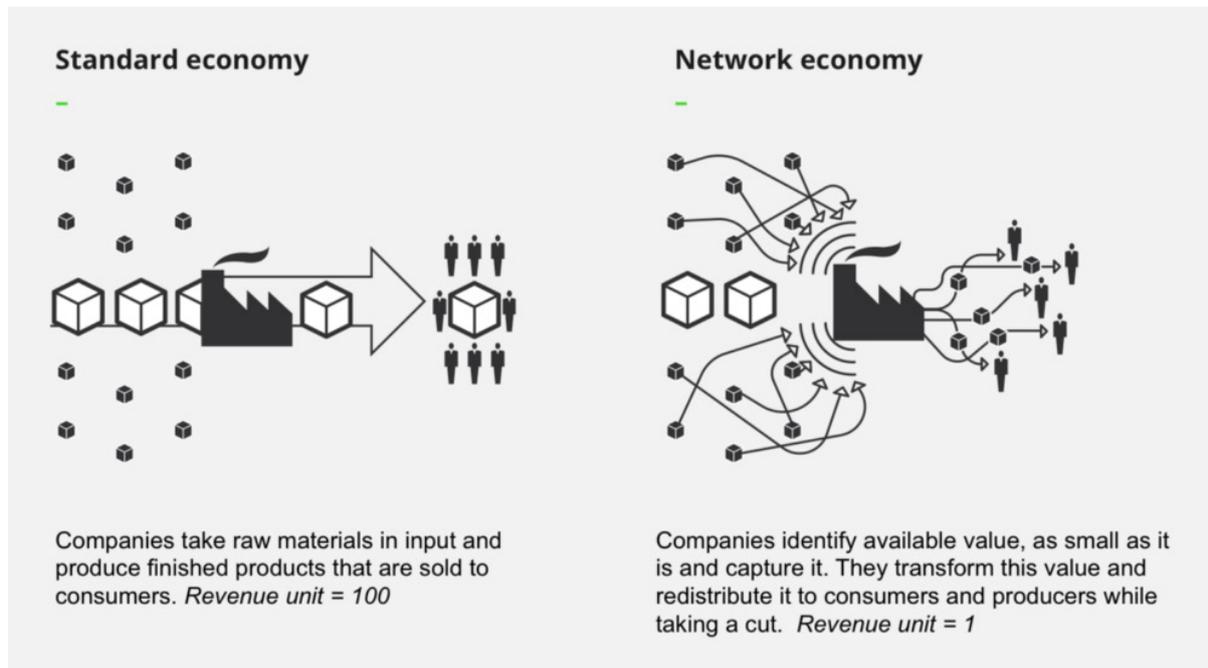
1.3 Network economies and the Internet of Things

During the mid-1990s, business and marketing gurus were fixated on the idea of a network economy, claiming information technology to be the new driver of industrial change.[2] Many of them claimed that we were on the verge of the Third Industrial Revolution—the information revolution! In a sense, the network economy was a precursor to the platform economy. As seen in the following graphic, the core element remains the same. In the network economy, companies no longer make profits via the production process as they do in a "standard economy", but they "identify available value, and transform and redistribute it to consumers and producers while taking a cut."[3]

According to this concept, value flows through the network, which relies on connectivity. The Internet has the major role of incorporating more people into networks, but a connection is required, which depends heavily on personal computers yet has physical implications. The advent of mobile and smart telephones allowed users to enjoy connections with more mobility, but these changes did not come about in a vacuum. Globalization and the rise of neoliberalism (deregulation and liberalization) paved the way for the digital age. As Huws (2014) pointed out, the International Telecommunications Union was established in 1992 and began an age of rapid deregulation around the world, expediting the cost reduction of services and leading to the advent of mobile phones.

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2   See Favernovel Innovate, "Four superpowers to outperform in the network economy (part 3)", Medium.com, 26 January, 2016, https://medium.com/inside-gafanomics/four-superpowers-to-outperform-in-the-network-economy-part-3-6105d1a4b6c8.

3   ibid.

Standard economy
−

Companies take raw materials in input and produce finished products that are sold to consumers. *Revenue unit = 100*

Network economy
−

Companies identify available value, as small as it is and capture it. They transform this value and redistribute it to consumers and producers while taking a cut. *Revenue unit = 1*

Source: Medium.com, https://medium.com/inside-gafanomics/four-superpowers-to-outperform -in-the-network-economy-part-3-6105d1a4b6c8.

Today, we are able to control almost all personal gadgets and everyday household appliances—communication devices, security systems or home entertainment—through a network connected via the internet. This kind of network, and the convenience that ensues, is known as the Internet of Things. As a network of personal devices, the Internet of Things looks much like a micro version of the network economy. For businesses, the Internet of Things opens up fields of possibilities to capture more value: The more devices that consumers connect to the network, the higher the degree of connectivity. The platform economy is reaping benefits from new digital lifestyles by capturing

newly created value made possible by personal devices. In this purview, digital lifestyles are advertised as maximizing freedom, although the media increasingly reports on the unintended consequences of personal devices, such as being used as tools of domestic abuse.[4]

1.4 Post-Fordism and new consumerism

Proponents of the platform economy often refer to the Internet of Things in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, or Industrial Revolution 4.0, implying a radical change in the production of goods and services and organization of work. The Internet of Things means convenience and a new consumption culture that puts consumption, or to be precise, consumers at the centre stage. From the view of post-Fordism,[5] consumption-centric production has further tilted the already off-kilter imbalance of power between consumers and precarious producers, who have been under constant attack since the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s.

4　See Nellie Bowles, "Thermostats, locks, lights: Digital tools for domestic abuse", *The New York Times*, 23 June 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/06/23/technology/ smart-home-devices-domestic-abuse.html.

5　Post-Fordism refers to the dominant model of industrial production that developed after Fordism, which is a labour process associated with the mass production and assembly line technique introduced by Henry Ford in the United States for automobile production. Post-Fordism is often defined as a labour process that relies heavily on a flexible production process and resulting flexible workforce.

The gig economy, driven by digital applications, encourages a hedonistic consumer model (Migone, 2006) that underlies modern lifestyles that cause enormous waste and consume unnecessary resources, which in turn reflects inequality gaps in society and environmentally destructive consumption patterns. It is not surprising to find that proponents of the platform economy often refer to "new consumerism" as an important driver of the platform economy. This discourse is exemplified by a market analysis report published in 2016 that welcomed the emergence of the platform economy, which it called a "sharing economy":

> *Today's consumers are redefining their values and priorities, leading to the birth of a new consumerism. This new consumerism unites many of the key consumer trends of our time, and these trends share many of the same drivers. The sharing economy is all about supply and demand…. As consumers reassess their priorities and increasingly ask themselves what they truly value, a host of major consumer trends have emerged: from the sharing economy to the preference given to experience over possessions, to frugal innovation and trading up and down. This shift towards new priorities, which we have christened 'The New Consumerism', is impacting across a multitude of industry sectors and has the power to transform even the most established markets."* [6]

Two on-demand food-delivery platforms—LINE Man and Grab Food—are examples of platforms that seek to create "digital lifestyles" that allow consumers to connect dimensions of their everyday lives via access to a single application. These two platforms are the primary case studies in this research.

1.5 Disruptive innovation versus sustaining innovation

Disruptive innovation is a mainstream concept used to justify, rather than criticize, the technology-driven platform economy. Its popularity led the men who coined the phrase to warn in 2015, "Too many people who speak of 'disruption' have not read a serious book or article on the subject. Too frequently they use the term loosely to invoke the concept of innovation in support of whatever it is they wish to do" (Clayton, Raynor and McDonald, 2015). We agree with these authors and want to highlight their actual emphasis on a process whereby a new, generally small player challenges the incumbent by creating a new market. This process often entails creating new business models. Clayton, Raynor and McDonald argued that Uber, albeit frequently cited as an example of a disruptive innovator for taxi services, does not qualify under their criteria. Uber has assumed neither a low-end nor new-market foothold but instead uses the strategies that come under the umbrella of sustaining innovations—improving the quality of existing services. Still, when compared with limousine services (known as "black car businesses"), Uber is likely to be considered "disruptive".

The mainstream business literature often ignores the impacts of disruptive innovation on employees of incumbent companies as well as the thorny questions on whether the new models are legal. From the business model perspective, disruptive technology may represent a break. But speaking from the perspective of labour, we point out that elements of disruptive technology, such as outsourcing, actually signify continuation in the genealogy of the industrial revolution. Disruptions often guide businesses to make strategic choices within the existing paradigm. That is, they are driven by capital's incessant needs to intensify work, strengthen control and create increasingly flexible employment (Collier et al., 2017; Katz and Krueger, 2016).

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6 See "The new consumerism: Redefining ownership, values and priorities", blog, https://blog.euromonitor.com/the-new-consumerism-redefining-ownership-values-and-priorities/.

1.6 The platform economy ecosystem

The concept of a business ecosystem is based on the metaphor of a natural ecosystem. Its inventor, James Moore, took inspiration from coevolution in biological and social systems.[7] According to Moore, companies coevolve capabilities around a new innovation. Coevolution is defined as "a process in which interdependent species evolve in an endless reciprocal cycle—in which changes in one species affect changes in other interdependent species and vice versa. In the business context, the ecosystem encompasses networks of suppliers, distributors, competitors, customers and so on. As in the nature, companies can act as both predator and prey, depending on where they find themselves in the market system" (Hayes, 2019).

To apply this concept with the platform economy, platform companies, as disruptive innovations, are obliged to build new networks of suppliers, distributors and new customers. In the case of on-demand food delivery, this means the need to recruit restaurants and delivery workers into the platform ecosystem, which often translates into strategies of entrance-fee waivers or the provision of exceptional incentives during the early stages of inception into the market.

As the authors of the disruptive innovation concept argue, new products or services may struggle in the beginning because consumers are used to the incumbents' products. For example, consumers were not initially receptive to transistor radio when it was first introduced to the market, despite its convenience, because of its lower sound quality. To integrate into the business ecosystem, platform companies need a marketing strategy to create new behaviours or cultures able to recruit new customers. Therefore, companies generally need a large amount of investment to sustain a business during the period in which the ecosystem is being built. Uber may offer a case in point here. In the second quarter of 2018, Uber reported heavy losses due to the operating costs of paying incentives and

enormous marketing expenses.[8] Likewise, Grab Taxi in Thailand used venture capital to create artificial demand to support supply at an early stage. Grab Taxi reported a net loss of more than 985 million Thai baht ($30.2 million)[9] in 2017, while total revenue was nearly 509 million baht ($15.6 million). If we consider the marketing expenses as a subsidy or dumping, the resulting negative impacts on the livelihood of traditional motorcycle taxi drivers thus raises questions about the legality of subsidy during the early stage of ecosystem building.

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7   See James F. Moore, "Predators and prey: A new ecology of competition", *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 1993 Issue, https://hbr.org/1993/05/predators-and-prey-a-new-ecology-of-competition.

8   See Alex Wilhelm, "Understanding why uber loses money", Crunchbase News, 26 October 2018, https://news.crunchbase.com/news/understanding-uber-loses-money/.

9   In this report, we use the 2017 average exchange rate of 32.6 baht per US$1.

Chapter 2
Ecosystem of on-demand food-delivery platforms

Over the past five years, digital platforms and the gig economy have dramatically transformed the way in which restaurants around the world sell and distribute their service to customers. Customers do not need to physically go to a restaurant but instead order food through online and app-based platforms, which in turn allow a third person to deliver directly to their home or workplace.
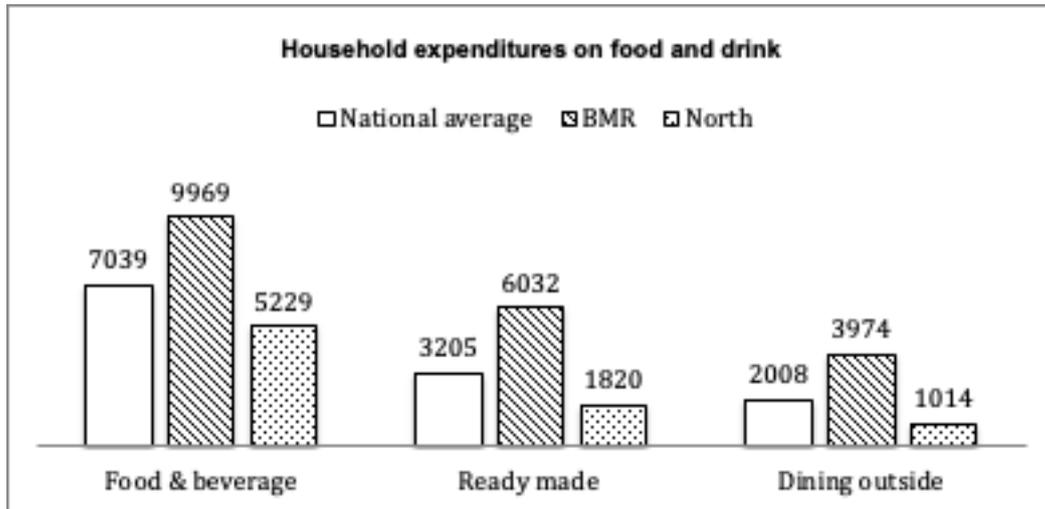
In the past, Thai consumers were only able to order food from places like fast-food restaurants that had in-house delivery services (such as McDonalds and KFC) or restaurants that were registered with websites that charged a fee. In Thailand, the convenience brought about by the on-demand food-delivery platforms has not only increased orders and sales of well-known restaurants but encouraged consumers to order food from street-food outlets that were hitherto accessible only through a physical visit. From an economics perspective, the advent of on-demand platforms solved market issues, such as exorbitant delivery costs for restaurants, long and unreliable delivery times and high service fees for consumers.

Given the importance of food and restaurant businesses to consumption in Thailand, the government is expected to view delivery platforms as a driver of grass-roots economic growth. Although on-demand platforms, such as Grab Food, function mainly as *labour platforms*, mainstream narratives tend to focus on the roles of the platform as a development in e-commerce. In this chapter, we approach on-demand food-delivery platforms from this common and limited perspective, which views platforms as operating through an online-to-offline (O2O) model. We begin with macro analysis of Thailand's food and restaurant sector, with emphasis on the replacement of urban economies revolving around dining out with on-demand food delivery. In short, we present an overview of the food industry ecosystem, covering consumers, retailers, and distributers—the three elements that are mediated by on-demand platforms.

2.1 Demand side: Household expenditure on ready-made food

Thailand's food-delivery market is expected to benefit from the country's generally high household food expenditure. According to the 2017 Household Socio-Economic Survey findings from Thailand, the average household's expenditure on food and beverages was 7,039 baht ($224) per month. This was approximately 33 per cent, or a third, of total household expenses—a large proportion and a steady trend for the past 10 years. The average expenditure per consumer in Bangkok and its three neighbouring provinces (also known as the Bangkok Metropolitan Region, or BMR) was 9,969 baht ($306) per month, which was 2,930 baht ($90) higher than the national average and almost double that of the region with the lowest food expenses (which was the northern region with an average expenditure per consumer of 5,229 baht ($160). From a demand perspective, the BMR is considered a region with great market potential.

In addition, Thai households spent almost half of their total food and beverage expenses on ready-made food (food that consumers buy to consume at home), at an average of 3,205 baht ($98) per month. Households in the BMR had very high purchasing power, with average expenses on ready-made food reaching 6,032 baht ($185) per month. Again, this was 2,827 baht ($87) higher than the national average. Households in the BMR spent three times more on ready-made food than the region with the lowest expenditure (again, the northern region, at an average of 1,820 baht ($55).

Household expenditures on food and drink

□ National average   ▨ BMR   ▫ North

	Food & beverage	Ready made	Dining outside
National average	7039	3205	2008
BMR	9969	6032	3974
North	5229	1820	1014

When it comes to dining out, households in Thailand spent an average of 2,008 baht ($62) per month while households in the BMR spent an average of 3,974 ($122) baht; it was almost twice the national average and almost triple of what the region that spends the lowest on dining out (at 1,014 baht, or $32, in the north). In sum, in both categories of ready-made meals and dining out, household expenditures in the BMR were much higher than the national average. The following tables illustrates the gaps in urban and rural consumption.

Average monthly expenses	Municipal/urban	Rural	Difference
Total expenses	25 500	17 715	7 785 (30.52%)
Total food-related expenses	8 008	6 193	1 815 (22.66%)
Ready-made food expenses	1 560	879	681 (43.6 %)
Dining-out expenses	2 727	1 381	1 346 (49.35%)

As a whole, consumers in large cities, especially in the BMR, exhibited much higher expenses than in other areas. The large differences in consumption reflected income gaps across the urban and rural divides. This geographic concentration of consumption is a major condition defining the operation of food-delivery platforms, which tend to target consumers with urban and digital lifestyles in major cities, such as Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Chonburi and Pattaya.

2.2 Supply side: Overview of food and restaurant businesses in Thailand

In general, food and restaurant industries are considered a major lifeline of the Thai economy, accounting for 23 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) (GAIN, 2018). In 2017–2018, the value of restaurant businesses in Thailand was at more than an estimated 100 billion baht ($3 billion), or about 2.5 per cent of GDP. On the supply side, there were 14,413 registered restaurants, a small number compared with the large amount of street food stalls and roadside stores in operation. In September 2019, the number of street vendors and food vendors in Bangkok alone was reportedly at least 116,423 (Wissanee, Vanel and Carré, 2019).

When we focus on registered businesses, more than 80 per cent are small companies with registered capital of no more than 5 million baht ($153,374). Geographically, the restaurants are concentrated in urban areas and touristic cities, such as Bangkok (at nearly 41.9 per cent) followed by Chonburi, Phuket, Surat Thani and Chiang Mai.

According to the Ministry of Commerce, of all registered food and restaurant businesses, 12,486 were limited companies, 1,920 were limited partnerships and seven businesses were public companies. When we look at the market share, these seven publicly traded companies, whose registered capital totalled 3.6 billion baht in 2019 dominate the sector. The combined value of these seven companies alone is 3.4 billion baht, greater than that of the 1,209 limited partnerships. By way of comparison, foreign investment in Thailand's food and restaurant sector was worth 11.9 billion, accounting for 12 per cent of total foreign investment, with the top three investing countries being Japan, the United States and France (DBD, 2019)

The players in the food and restaurant businesses are the restaurant and retail chains that are actively involved in the development of the food-delivery business ecosystem. In 2017, the market value of the food and drink retail sector was 1.64 trillion baht (DBD, 2019), with the main players encompassing CP Group (CP Food and CP All), Central Retail, Tesco Lotus (managed by Ekachai Distribution Company System Co., Ltd), Big C (managed by Berli Jucker) and Villa Market. These large retail chains recently laid out their plans for investment in the food and grocery

delivery platforms. For example, in late 2019, the Central Food Retail Group (which manages Tops Supermarket) announced a plan to invest in the expansion of its distribution channels via a website and digital application called "Tops Online", based on its e-commerce investment plan of 10 billion baht. Nicolo Galante, CEO of the Central Food Retail Group, explained in an interview with the *Bangkok Post* newspaper, "Thai people still don't like to buy fresh food and produce online. But we believe that Tops' services, especially the new platform, will change Thai people's behaviour to order more groceries online."[10]

Central's strategy is to introduce new technology in logistics and distribution centres[11] as well as its collaboration with the Grab Food platform[12] (which is now owned by Central). In fact, the comment that the Tops Online platform needs and can change behaviours of Thai consumers reminds us of the previously referenced disruptive innovation. Of course, the new ecosystem will also need a new group of workers.

2.3 On-demand food-delivery platforms

On-demand food-delivery platforms in China

In China, the two largest food-delivery platforms are Meituan and Ele.me, with Alibaba the major shareholder in both. Meituan started business in 2010 as a restaurant-review platform that also published information on promotions or discounts. It began offering food delivery in 2013, before expanding in 2015 into a partnership with Dianping, a website focused on connecting consumers with new lifestyle services in China. Meituen-Dianping's slogan is to help consumers "eat better and live better". By the end of April 2018, the company had reached more than 340 million orders over a 12-month period, becoming

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10 See "Central eyes e-commerce top spot," Bangkok Post, 17 January 2019, www.bangkokpost.com/business/1612602/central-eyes-e-commerce-top-spot.

11 See Ratirita, "Central retail joins Frasers in opening distribution centers with 2,000 M. worth of Omnichannel", *Brand Inside Asia*, 15 August 2019, https://brandinside.asia/central-retail-fpt-omnichannel-dc/.

12 See Ratirita, "Grab and Tops Online deliver grocery within 2 hrs, overtaking LINE Man Grocery", Brand Inside Asia, 15 August 2019, https://brandinside.asia/grab-tops-online-grocery-delivery/.

the largest food-delivery platform in China. In May 2019, Meituan launched Meituan Delivery, an e-commerce platform that sells products similarly to Alibaba, with delivery covering 2,800 cities around the world.[13]

Meituan Delivery's growth reflects the desire of platform owners to expand their services to cover all aspects of daily life. By linking with e-commerce and logistics capabilities, on-demand food delivery is only one of many services that the company offers to attract consumers to its platform. With an expanding middle class, China's platform-based food delivery is expanding rapidly. The market is worth more than an estimated 1.12 trillion baht, with more than 3 million motorcyclists delivering food.[14] By comparison, food-delivery riders in Thailand are faced with working conditions that are more comparable with their Chinese peers than in Western markets. For instance, due to the urban setting, food-delivery workers in the United States and in European cities often use bicycles, while their counterparts in small towns often own cars. Unlike customers in China and Thailand, American and European customers tend not to order food from faraway restaurants because of high service fees.

Because of their enormous investment in promotions and subsidies, platform companies in China and Thailand can sometimes lower delivery fees to the extent that customers pay cheaper prices when ordering food to eat at home than dining in. As a result, the Chinese food-delivery platform economy has grown to three times the size of what it is in the United States.[15] However, harsh working conditions push riders to self-organize and occasionally call for strikes. The China Labour Bulletin website published statistics on rising rider strikes in early 2019: up to 33 of them during the first half of 2019, compared with 48 in 2018 and 8 in 2017.[16]

In addition to the problem of low wages, other issues that cause Chinese food-delivery riders to call for strikes include substandard working conditions, the pressure to deliver food on time and the need to work under dangerous conditions (bad weather and road conditions) without receiving additional wages.

On-demand food-delivery platforms in Thailand

In 2017, the food-delivery sector in Thailand was worth an estimated 26 billion baht,[17] equivalent to 6.5 per cent of the total restaurant market value.[18] With digital platforms now having a main role, the sector is expected to grow by at least 10 per cent per year.[19] Currently, the main players in Thailand's food-delivery sector are LINE (LINE Man), Grab Taxi (providing food-delivery services through the application Grab Food), Food Panda and the Gojek Group (via Get).

We divide on-demand food-delivery platforms in Thailand into three groups, according to the development of the platforms:

1. Dedicated food-delivery platforms. This first type of platform was designed to be a food-delivery business in the first place. A well-known example is Food Panda in Germany.

2. Franchise in-house platforms. Multinational restaurant chains, such as Pizza Hut and KFC, which operate in-house delivery services, also own delivery platforms to compete with dedicated platforms. For the past 20 years, these franchise restaurants were the leaders in food-delivery services, employing full-time staff to receive orders via hotline ordering systems. After on-demand food delivery took off, restaurant chains responded by reducing their workforce and relying on the gig workforce available on labour platforms while simultaneously developing their platforms to compete with the former.

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13 "Meituan opens global leading delivery platform with new brand Meituan Delivery", https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/meituan-opens-global-leading-.

14 See Nick Aspinwall, "China's delivery drivers rage against the algorithm", The Nation.com, 21 August 2019, www.thenation.com/article/china-delivery-meituan-uber/

15 ibid.

16 ibid.

17 See "Home delivery/takeaway in Thailand", *Euromonitor International*, May 2018, www.euromonitor.com/100-home-delivery-takeaway-in-thailand/report.

18 Researchers' calculations.

19 Kasikorn Research Center forecasts that the platform-based food delivery sector will grow around 14 per cent in 2019 compared with 2018. Between 2014 and 2018, the food industry sector grew 10 per cent yearly on average. See https://kasikornresearch.com/.

3. Synergistic or collaborative platforms (the self-claimed "lifestyle platforms"). The last type of on-demand food-delivery platform is owned by companies that originally developed communication platforms with a large user base. These companies do not generally own distribution or logistics ecosystems essential to delivery services. The emergence of food delivery and other related services, such as parcel or passenger delivery, is the result of a collaboration or joint venture with local businesses wanting to seize opportunities. For example, the Thai food-delivery platform LINE Man is a local unit of LINE. Because LINE does not have logistics expertise, LINE Man partners with Lalamove, a logistics partner, to provide customers with delivery services.

LINE Man

LINE is registered and headquartered in Japan but owned by a Korean businessman. An earthquake in Japan in March 2011 gave rise to the need for a platform by which people could use to communicate with each other. LINE subsequently evolved into an application for private messages and games.[20]

LINE opened an office in Bangkok in March 2014, before the launch of LINE Taxis in January 2015. The LINE Man unit offers three areas of service in Thailand: parcel delivery, ride hailing and food delivery (as of 2016). The chief executive officer of LINE Man's food delivery has pointed out that LINE wants to promote small and medium-sized restaurants in less desirable locations so that they can reach customers who seek delicious food and convenience. Therefore, the service is apt for a city with heavy traffic, such as Bangkok.[21] While LINE claims to be a service that

helps food sellers and consumers overcome geographic obstacles, it also encourages consumers to order food from remote and otherwise economically inaccessible areas, creating more traffic and trips hitherto seen as unnecessary.

On the occasion of the second-year anniversary of LINE Man's operations in Thailand, the managing director of LINE Man remarked:

> *LINE's services are divided into two main areas. The area that generates income for the company is games and stickers. The second area is LINE Man, which is still in a period of business expansion. To get recognized, we are mainly investing in marketing, various promotions and, at one point, will start earning income...."*

Grab Food

Grab is a Singaporean company founded in 2012 by Anthony Tan and Tan Hooi Ling, two classmates in the Master of Business Administration programme at Harvard University. Anthony Tan is the successor to the president of Tan Chong Motors, a major Nissan manufacturer and distributor in South-East Asia. Grab began as a taxi-booking business named MyTeksi that focused on the safety of drivers and passengers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, before its operations were moved to Singapore.[22] After Grab made a deal with Uber in April 2018, Grab dominated the market of ride hailing in South-East Asia and now operates in more than 225 cities in eight countries.[23]

Grab started its operations in Thailand in 2013 with the Grab Taxi service by enlisting taxis and private cars to its digital platform and then launched its food and parcel delivery services as well as grocery pick-up services. Like

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20 Although a source contradicts that the true origin of LINE originated from Lee Hae Jin, the owner of Korean Naver Corporation, who wanted to develop a search engine and brought in Han Game, an online game maker, to develop the system that later became the prototype of LINE. According to this narrative, the Japanese ownership came after Han Game registered Line. For more details, see www.billionmindset.com/lee-hae-jin-line-founder/.

21 See Duangkamol Lohasriskul, "Following LINE Man's success, only after two years, it reached 1.2 million users/month", Sentang Sedtee, 29 October 2018, www.sentangsedtee.com/career-channel/article_93614.

22 See "How Grab's CEO steered it from a garage in Malaysia to Southeast Asia's most valuable tech unicorn", *South China Morning Post*, 28 July 2018, www.scmp.com/tech/article/2157177/ how-grabs-ceo-steered-it-garage-malaysia-southeast-asias-most-valuable-tech.

23 See "Uber quits 8 countries in Southeast Asia, selling out to river Grab", CNN Business, 26 March 2018, https://money.cnn.com/25/03/2018/technology/uber-grab-deal-southeast-asia/index.html.

LINE Man, Grab aims to integrate the application into everyday life.

No government agency regulates platform businesses in Thailand, and official statistical data on the number of workers, revenue or market share of platforms are not available. All information that appears in the media derives from voluntary disclosure and news reports. Grab's market share in Thailand is likely more than the estimated 50 per cent.[24] During the first 10 months of 2019, Grab received 120 million orders across its services. In January 2019 alone, its management reported that 3 million meals across 16 provinces had been ordered through the application's food-delivery service.[25]

2.4 Workforce

Official statistics on Thailand's on-demand food-delivery workforce is not yet available. A large-scale survey of the food-delivery labour force has never been conducted in Thailand either. A major obstacle to determining the actual number of people who work for food-delivery platforms is the fact that these companies refuse to recognize them as employees. Most food-delivery riders are temporary or part-time workers paid per delivery—gig workers. One of the few available records relates to the courier service Lalamove. In February 2017, Lalamove enlisted more than an estimated 17,000 drivers to deliver parcels and food.[26] Most had employment contracts, but only 35 per cent of them were full-time drivers. In 2019, a Lalamove executive revealed, "Currently, we have about 80,000 drivers; 95 per cent are motorcyclists, in which 70 per cent of drivers are in parcel and document delivery. The rest are drivers

who use cars."[27] Based on this statement, we estimate that, as of December 2019, at least 30,000 gig riders were employed in food delivery with Lalamove.

Trends and developments

Several established fast food and restaurant chains that used to hire full-time food-delivery workers have begun to realize the impacts of competition with on-demand platforms. Our interviews with a trade union leader in the fast-food restaurant industry suggests a trend of workers being asked to resign and then apply for gig work with an on-demand platform. In short, pressured by the lower prices offered by on-demand labour platforms, restaurant chains are responding by making full-time delivery workers redundant and outsourcing their delivery work to on-demand delivery platforms, such as Lalamove.

Rather than paying wages and benefits to delivery workers, these restaurants prefer to cut their costs by signing a contract and paying fees directly to an on-demand labour platform. In addition to these macro impacts on the rise of precarious work, this business model allows restaurants to unload obligations and responsibilities to food-delivery workers while inevitably lowering their collective bargaining power. In the next chapter, we discuss in further detail the employment relations between on-demand food-delivery labour platforms and their workers.

> " Why not let anyone who already has assets to try, when we have a monitoring system? We have tried to do it at Buriram Motor GP fair in 2018, from the first to the eighth of October last year. There were hundreds of thousands of tourists, but only 15 motorcycle taxi drivers in town. How would that be enough? We started with 200 Grab [motorcycle taxi] drivers, with 15,000 passengers, creating a total of 600,000 baht. The income was immediately distributed. If it is clear that the city accepts our service, people accept it, and we have good monitoring systems—the problem is solved…. " CEO, Grab Thailand

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24 See "Heated competition in the food delivery: Companies race to issue promotion campaigns for market share", Prachachat Thurakij, 23 May 2019, www.prachachat.net/ict/ news329846-.

25 See "Grab Food, a major factor in Grab's 10-month growth of 120 million orders", Manager Online, 7 November 2019, https://mgronline.com/cyberbiz/detail/9620000107136

26 See Kampanart Kanjanakarn, "Lalamove Thailand reveals 600% increase of services", *Forbes*, 2 March 2017, http://forbesthailand.com/news-detail.php?did=1455.

27 See Kampanart Kanjanakarn, "Lalamove Thailand reveals the 2018 total values of 1.2 billion baht", Forbes, 23 January 2019, forbesthailand.com.

2.5 Thailand's context of informal work

Before discussing platform-based work in detail in the next chapter, it is essential to contextualize the employment relationships—an important condition that renders gig work popular and somewhat "desirable" for Thai workers.

Informal work in the Thai economy

Thailand's economy is dominated by the informal sector. The International Labour Organization characterizes informal work as having unofficial employment relations and a lack of access to social and legal benefits. Generally speaking, when informal workers, such as self-employed persons and street vendors, are ill, they do not receive benefits under the social security system. In Thailand, approximately 28 per cent of employment in Bangkok and more than 56 per cent of employment across the country is of this nature (WIEGO, 2019).

In this perspective, gig work should be recognized as informal work. When an economy is dominated by informal work, it is worth asking how the growth of the platform or gig economy affects the structure of the labour market, labour standards and workers' welfare more broadly. In Thailand, we found that gig workers in the platform economy come from two main groups: those who were already in the informal sector and those who used to work in the formal sector but decided to move to a digital platform. Reasons for switching to informal work include but are not limited to the following.

1. Relatively low wage level

According to our interviews with platform-based food-delivery riders, the low wage status in their former full-time jobs was an important factor that they switched to platform-based work. Although the riders had lower job security with the gig work, they received much higher incomes than before, especially during the first two years in which the first platforms started their operations (2017–2018). Surprisingly, many food-delivery riders commented that the higher earnings outweighed the instability.

During the period in which we conducted this research (April to September 2019), the average wage of workers in the transportation industry was around 18,000 baht per month (NSO, 2012). By comparison, platform-based food-delivery riders earned between 15,000 baht ($500) and 40,000 baht ($1,333) per month.[28] When asked about income from food delivery, most informants responded that it "depends on diligence", implying income fluctuation from month to month and unpredictability. However, we found that when riders worked full-time, meaning, when they decided to extend the time spent on working each day beyond eight hours, they were satisfied with the income. We also found that riders who worked such long hours could attain an above-average income. This is in line with a statement from a platform executive whom we interviewed: "Drivers who regularly work at least 15–20 gigs per day have an average income of 20,000 baht ($667) to 30,000 baht ($1,000) per month, some people up to 60,000 baht ($2,000)."

2. The growing precarity of full-time work

A common trend in labour markets around the world, especially after the financial crisis that began in 2008, is that full-time work is being replaced by precarious work.[29] Currently, precarious work consists of many forms, such as fixed-term contracts, subcontracting, outsourced work and agency work. This kind of work has expanded in both the private and public sectors, not excluding state enterprises and non-profit organizations.

In 2015, only an estimated 25 per cent of workers globally had a permanent employment contract. In Thailand, more than 62 per cent of work is precarious.[30] Compared to less-stable and precarious work in general, platform-based work has become more attractive among the Thai workforce. Platform companies have advertised and promoted two main benefits of the food-delivery gigs:

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28 We use an average exchange rate of 30 baht per $1 for 2019
29 See Guy Standing: "A revolt is coming for cloud labor", HuffPost.com, 27 October 2016, www.huffpost.com/entry/cloud-labour-revolt_b_8392452.
30 See "5 things you need to know about precarious work (and how you might already be doing it)", Asia Pacific Women Law and Development, October 2017, www.APWLD.org.

One, gig workers can achieve a high income over a short period of work. And two, being a partner with labour platforms means freedom. Our interviews with riders suggest that, regardless of its real meaning, from a worker's point of view, "freedom" means flexibility or an ability to determine their own schedule. They can clock in whenever they want. More importantly, freedom also means a work environment without regular confrontations with controlling and abusive bosses or supervisors (although the new work processes appear to shift workplace tension and conflict to a different locus, an issue to be discussed further on). Our informants seemed to have experiences with unhealthy workplaces in which abuses of power have been normalized.

3. Cultures of abusive power at work

Many respondents explained that they were fed up with abuses of power at work or with work assignments that did not fit their skills and interests. In addition, the work culture in which they could not participate in the decision-making or access a grievance mechanism made them stressed and unhappy. In platform-based work, food-delivery riders feel that at least they have a sort of freedom in not having to report to anyone. Although platform-based gig work appears to offer an alternative to the problems that workers had experienced, some riders reflected that they experience other difficulties now that they have to interact directly with platform users or customers. For example, some riders have had negative experiences with customers, who seem to have replaced the authority of supervisors in commanding and exercising power. In fact, cases of customers using derogatory and demeaning language with riders unwilling to yield to extra requests (such as to pick up ice or groceries, which is not a typical part of the food-delivery service) have been reported in Thai media. Given platform companies' emphasis on using customer evaluation to assess individual riders, riders feel obligated to yield to excessive demands.

4. Lack of freedom of association and collective bargaining

The closing of political space in Thai society goes hand in hand with the disregard of workers' freedoms of association and assembly in the workplace. In 2019, the International Trade Union Confederation lowered Thailand's ranking from level four (indicating a systematic violation of labour rights) to level five (where there is no guarantee of labour rights).[31]

When workers do not enjoy rights to representation and collective bargaining, a violation of their labour rights can easily occur. With trade union membership rates at the low level of less than 5 per cent, workers lack a collective voice and power to improve their workplace standards. For this reason, Thai workers in general lack a model of decent work and cannot easily imagine what a quality job looks like.

As more workers shift from formal to informal work, this trend raises concerns over how the government and labour rights organizations will adjust their roles to more effectively protect platform-based gig workers. The new conditions of platform-mediated work are dynamic, complicated and less straightforward than conventional labour relations. It is crucial for policymakers and labour rights defenders to study and understand the strategies that platforms use to control employment conditions and labour relations, which is the subject of the next chapter.

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31 See Global Rights Index 2019, www.ituc-csi.org/rights-index2019-.

Chapter 3
Gig work and the new labour process

This chapter systematically explains the way in which labour platforms reorganize labour relations and create gig work. The goal is to explain the strategies or mechanisms that digital labour platforms employ to both create precarious work conditions and, despite the precariousness, ensure a consistent supply of labour. In general, labour platforms rely on four strategies: employment (mis-) classification and partnerships, oversupply creation, opaque work assignment and a combination of piece-rate and incentives. All four strategies together create the labour control and pay regimes that both encourage and coerce riders to work longer and harder.

Background of rider interviewees: Pre-gig work histories

During our research, we conducted in-depth interviews with 20 riders, 17 of whom were men and three women. Among the men, 11 already worked in the informal sector, such as motorcycle taxi driver, day labourer and small business owner. Their previous jobs were low-income and precarious. When we met them, they were all gig workers who worked more than eight hours per day, with gig work providing their primary source of income.

The other nine riders came from the formal economy. They each had been employed by a company on a full-time basis or by a state enterprise with a short-term contract. All three women delivered food only part-time, typically after their working hours at the full-time job. Their previous wages were approximately 20,000 baht per month. The other six riders who came from the formal sector had become full-time gig workers. They had tried the gig work first before deciding to leave their formal-sector job. Their previous salaries were between 8,000 baht and 12,000 baht. These riders 17 started by gigging after working hours to make sure that the income was good and somewhat certain. Among them, one person had been working with a private company on a one-year contract that had not been extended. As a result, he decided to become a full-time food-delivery rider.

One of the interviewees concluded that the gig work is more independent than working as a full-time employee with a lower salary and under great control of the supervisor. The deciding factor that made him leave his previous job was unsatisfactory work assignments. He expressed a widely shared expectation among the interviewees that platform-mediated gig work will be his main source of income for the long term.

3.1 Strategies of labour platforms as labour brokers

The framework of labour platforms (see the Collier et al. definition in chapter 1) conceptualizes labour platforms as "labour brokerage": They act as a broker that matches the buying and selling of labour power. This perspective allows us to understand the roles and functions of platforms as well as the employment relations between platform companies and food-delivery workers. This chapter describes the strategies and methods that platforms use to create particular terms of employment and labour processes distinct from that traditional work.

3.2 The business partnership model

One distinctive feature of labour platforms as a business model is the normalization of "partnership" between platform companies and gig workers, replacing traditional employer–employee relations. In reality, this business strategy is anything but new. A well-known example was developed and made infamous by the American retail chain Walmart, which refuses to recognize its workers as "employees" but instead classifies them as "associates". United States labour historian Nelsen Lichtenstein called such a model a "template firm" that provides low wages and job insecurity without investing in workers' skills and benefiting from a high labour force turnover.[32]

Like elsewhere, the main on-demand food-delivery platforms in Thailand use the same model to create flexibility for the owning company. Since their launches, these platforms have invited riders to become so-called "rider partners", with an emphasis on freedom, whereby food-delivery riders can choose their own work schedule, with enticing incentives as compensation.

From the perspective of platform companies, freedom means complete autonomy in determining the terms of work: pricing, service charges and the operational costs they pass on to rider partners. In traditional settings, as with in-house delivery, expenses like wages and benefits

(such as accident insurance) for deliverers were incurred by the management, as were all vehicle-related costs, such as fuel, maintenance and depreciation. In the new model, the rider partners are responsible for these expenses. Food-delivery riders are then a special kind of partner—a partner without any decision-making and negotiating power. As many commentators have observed, one of the signs that platform companies are not serious about equitable partnerships is that they rarely share any information about business or sales with their rider partners. Responsible for mainstreaming the new labour relations model in the age of the platform economy, for instance, Uber has been harshly criticized by labour movements around the world, particularly for the neglect of labour laws (minimum wage laws, working hours, overtime pay, severance) (see Issac, 2019 for details from hundreds of Uber driver interviews).

3.3 Oversupply of labour

Platform companies have effectively used marketing to positively frame the new forms of work. As food-delivery riders have discovered, companies are recruiting unlimited numbers of riders and benefiting from the large pool of workers, despite a high worker turnover. Most platforms contract riders through a fully flexible form of employment that pays only a piece-rate fee (comparable to independent contractor models), while the riders bear the direct cost of operations. This employment method creates a two-tier workforce within companies:

1. Workers who work part-time or choose to work as needed.

2. A semblance of "full-time" workers with piece-rate incomes, who in reality may have longer working hours than 10–12 hours per day.

Despite this common model, labour platforms are diverse in character, and each platform still has distinctive employment conditions and technical features. A few platform companies employ a mix of permanent and flexible employment models, but these platforms tend to have a quota of permanent employees who make up a small proportion of their total labour base. For instance, a platform might employ shift-based permanent workers as its main riders, complemented by a group of independent

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32 "What are the characteristics of the Wal-Mart Business model?", www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/walmart/interviews/ lichtenstein.html.

food-delivery workers who work part-time when they want to. Food-delivery platforms that employ this type of mixed employment to guarantee a minimum labour force include Meituen, Deliveroo and Food Panda. Our research suggests that in the beginning, some labour platforms in Thailand also engaged in limited permanent recruitment. However, after a short period of trial and error, they appear to have ceased this practice, and most riders are now hired on a gig basis.

Compared with traditional employers, labour platforms have made the recruitment process simpler. Applications are completed online, require little proof of identity and take only one to two days to process.[33] Training is also short, often lasting only two to three hours and mainly covering company regulations, basic traffic rules, dress code and tutorials on how to use the application to receive orders and deliver food. Most importantly, food-delivery platforms are able to recruit an unlimited number of riders due to the internal system by which work is allocated.

Our interviews with food-delivery riders suggest that labour platform companies use algorithms that allot each rider only a certain amount of gigs—a sort of ceiling. Of course, this is a generalization, and each platform has a distinctive algorithm. However, in general, food-delivery workers are categorized into classes according to the company's evaluation of their performance. A worker's class determines the conditions and amount of work they receive. How digital application assigns gig to riders also varies across platforms. For instance, on one labour platform, riders compete with each other to accept gigs as they appear on their application. The platform's operational rule of thumb is to guarantee a larger number of riders than customers at any given time in each geographical area.

Recruiting workers limitlessly results in surplus labour competing for each job to reduce the wait time for consumers who use the platform. Economically speaking, competition in the supply of delivery riders does not affect pricing or service fees because food-delivery platforms (like platform-mediated gigs in general) determine delivery fees unilaterally through the algorithm. In other words, food-

delivery riders have no say in the price-determination process. Given that gig workers are price takers without the power to make decisions or negotiate the price of their wages, some commentators argue strongly that platform companies cannot deny their de facto employer status (Sunshine, 2018).

3.4 Regimes of control and conflict diversion and displacement

Veen et al. (2019) conducted research on Australia's major food-delivery platforms, Uber Eats and Deliveroo, offering insight into the way in which labour platforms control workers via digital applications. While both platforms have certain common labour-control processes, each platform's organization is distinct. For example, Deliveroo sets a limit to the number of workers delivering at a given time through a tight selection process, a waitlist and the use of training to control the supply of new workers. By contrast, Uber Eats has almost no limitations, and gig workers are able to immediately offer their labour. Interestingly, the research found that the restraints set by Deliveroo instilled in gig workers a sense of pride, resulting from the feeling that working for Deliveroo is a greater sign of professionalism than Uber Eats.

In the context of Thai food-delivery platforms, the interviews with riders who gigged for two dominant food-delivery platforms (LINE Man and Grab Food) produced similar findings. Both platform companies have different methods of work assignment and thus differing worker responses.

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33 For a summary of application process by major platforms, see https://www.thairath.co.th/scoop/1291679.

Platform	A	B
Work allocation	Gig assignment: assigns a gig to specific rider who is in the vicinity. If the rider does not accept or refuses, the work will be assigned to another rider.	Gig distribution: distributes a gig to a group of riders in the area so that they compete to accept the order on a first-come-first-serve basis.
Worker responses	Riders can accept a gig while in transit.	Riders are only able to accept a gig when vehicles are not in motion.
Working period	24 hours	10 a.m.–10 p.m.

Most of the riders we interviewed gigged for the type of platform that uses the gig-assignment method (as opposed to the gig-distribution method). They can accept gigs while their vehicles are in motion, whereas the competitor platform requires vehicles to stay immobile while competing under the gig-distribution method. One rider noted that he doesn't understand the criteria used by the platform to assign gigs to a certain rider. According to him, the assignment method is not as transparent and fair as the distribution method used by the other platform. Moreover, he thought that it would be safer if riders were forced to stop their vehicles while responding to the application. On the contrary, riders from the other platform felt that the distribution system rushes riders to accept gigs without carefully considering such information as distance and time required. Compromised decision-making causes stress over not being able to deliver food within the time limit. Interestingly, the food-delivery riders did not raise concerns that competition may lead to conflict among riders. Because there is such a large number of riders competing, the competition appears to be impersonal.
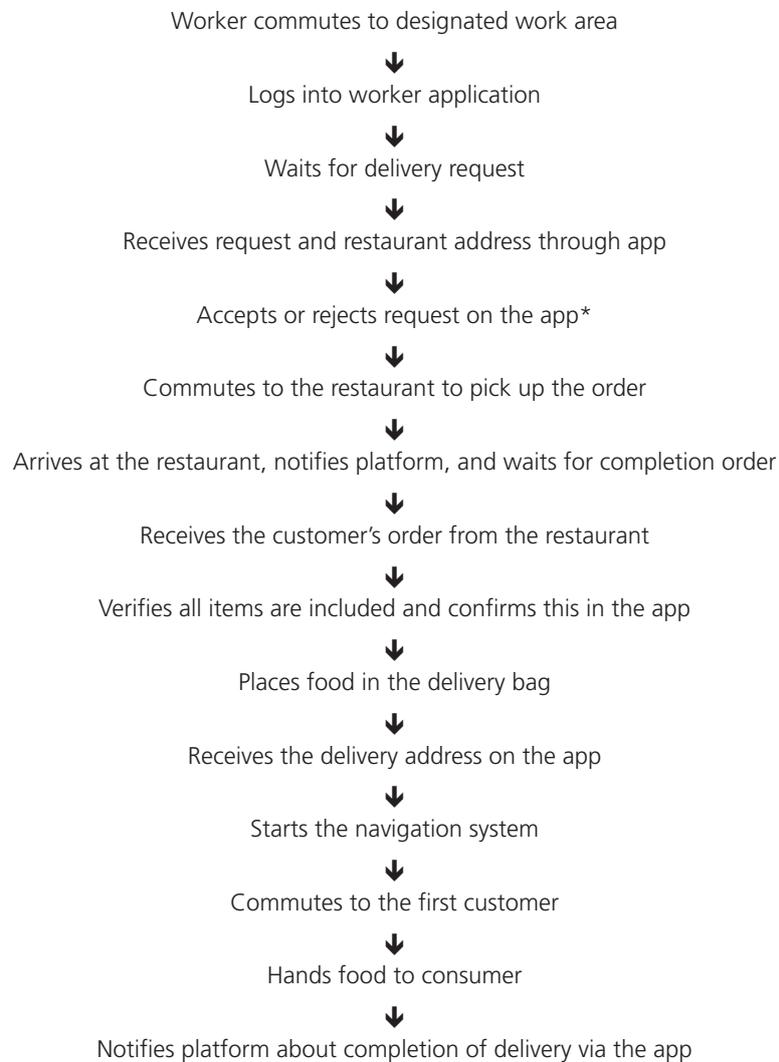
Veen et al. (2019) found two major platforms in Australia that employ a control regime constituted by three components: technological infrastructure, information asymmetries and an opaque performance evaluation system. The interviewed food-delivery riders in Bangkok disclosed that they believe platforms evaluate performance without transparency and clarity as well. For example, many riders felt that there was discrepancy or inconsistency between the platform's stated policies and implementation. The platforms often warn riders that the violations of rules (such as rejecting too many gigs or having low user-performance ratings) can lead to a temporary suspension. However, riders reported sometimes being suspended for

a number of hours or days without knowing what they had done wrong. Instead, they felt that they were suspended after reaching a threshold of good performance or for overachieving targets. One food-delivery rider noted:

" *We never know when we will be banned (or suspended). There are no rules on the ban. Probably, we do too much work. Sometimes, in the evening, when I refuse too often, I get a five-day ban or no gig appears for two hours. I called [the call centre] to ask. They couldn't give a clear answer but said that the system was set up like that. We don't know when each ban will end either. We demand clear information so that we can improve.* "

Prior to the rise of application-based work, deliveries at restaurants were assigned by supervisors to employees available according to the relevant geographic area. While digital platforms assign gigs to riders, the decision to accept or reject the job mainly rests on the riders. In exercising their autonomy to accept the gigs, riders are presented with an illusion of full freedom. In reality, food-delivery riders must follow strict instructions, as shown in the study of platform-based food-delivery workers in Australia in which riders were not allowed to deviate from suggested routes (see the following chart). In short, because work procedures are strictly determined, issues of control versus agency in digitally mediated gig work are more complicated than initially meets the eye.

Steps in the labour process of an Australian platform

Worker commutes to designated work area
↓
Logs into worker application
↓
Waits for delivery request
↓
Receives request and restaurant address through app
↓
Accepts or rejects request on the app*
↓
Commutes to the restaurant to pick up the order
↓
Arrives at the restaurant, notifies platform, and waits for completion order
↓
Receives the customer's order from the restaurant
↓
Verifies all items are included and confirms this in the app
↓
Places food in the delivery bag
↓
Receives the delivery address on the app
↓
Starts the navigation system
↓
Commutes to the first customer
↓
Hands food to consumer
↓
Notifies platform about completion of delivery via the app

*=Second-order requests can be received on the Uber Eats app before the pick-up is completed.

Source: Veen et al., 2019, p. 7.

By replacing human supervisors with digital applications, the labour platform can divert conflict or tension between supervisors and workers typically experienced in traditional workplaces. However, the conflicts common to factory or shop floors are not eliminated but simply transferred into two new areas: in riders' interactions with "black box" digital applications and during interactions with demanding customers. When problems arise in both interactions, riders are asked to use the platform's customer service. The food-delivery riders expressed that customer service centres are generally unhelpful in providing genuine answers to questions or concerns. From the perspective of platform companies, the role of a customer service centre appears indispensable for diluting the tensions and displacing frustration that riders have.

Most riders concurred that customers increasingly take on supervisory roles. And the food-delivery platforms tend to use riders' performance data in ways that are different from ride-hailing platforms. Instead of using data to warn customers of badly reviewed drivers, for example, companies use evaluation data to divide riders into "grades" or classes, as mentioned earlier. According to the riders we interviewed, each rider is assigned different pay and incentive schemes depending on their class.

3.5 Pay and incentive and punishment systems

Platforms combine piece-rate pay, incentive systems and a regime of control. A rider receives the piece-rate per delivery, which, although varying across platforms, tends to be very low. Not unlike a garment sweatshop, for example, labour platforms use piece-rate pay to motivate riders to deliver more food orders. Meanwhile, monetary incentives are specially designed to change over time to reward work in certain areas and/or at certain times (for example, the central area where customers and food orders are concentrated or peak hours requiring extra labour). Labour platforms also make deductions from riders' income, which generally includes a commission deduction of 15 per cent income and 3 per cent deduction for tax withholding.

The pay and incentive system found across three platforms varied as follows.

1. Piece-rate pay

Pay	Platform A	Platform B	Platform C
Fixed delivery fees	50 baht/delivery	55 baht/delivery	40 baht–50 baht/hour plus 18 baht–20 baht/fixed delivery fees according to area
Distance-based fees	10 baht/km after the first 5 km	9 baht/km	--
Deductions	15% commission and 3% income tax deductions	15% deduction	3% deduction
Working conditions	10 a.m. – 10 p.m.	Higher fees during night time	Work according to zones

The piece-rate fees vary by platform and depend on the conditions of work that the platforms have set for riders. For instance, platform A uses a combination of fixed fees per delivery that are "topped up" with variable, distance-based delivery fees. For deliveries of less than 5 km, riders received a fixed fee of 50 baht per delivery in Bangkok (with fixed fees ranging from 40 baht to 70 baht depending on the province). For deliveries of more than 5 km, riders receive an additional 10 baht per kilometre.

In contrast, another food-delivery platform (platform C) organizes workers into two categories. First, full-time riders receive a fixed salary at a rate of around 10–20 per cent higher than the minimum wage, with additional fees per delivery. A second category of riders receives only a salary per hour. In short, the platform uses a combination of full-time and part-time riders while setting the delivery fees per hour for part-time drivers according to each province. Another new food-delivery platform entering the market announced that its salary is 15,000 baht ($500) to 25,000 baht ($833) per month, but it is not clear whether such a salary is for full-time riders or what the composition of its workforce looks like.

Piece-rate pay schemes are a common mechanism used by platforms to control riders, lengthen the working day and expedite each delivery. It is a traditional form of labour control widely used since before World War II.[34] With its integration into platform-based gig work, labour platforms have turned the clock back and reinserted the piece-rate pay scheme as one of the most common forms of employment today.

2. Incentives

Incentives are an integral part of the pay scheme, facilitating the control of labour supply. Labour platforms use algorithms to design and calculate various incentives to maximize the labour supply at a given time. For example, one platform offers a guaranteed income of 500 baht ($17) for new food-delivery riders. After completing 10 deliveries, riders who earn less than 500 baht receive a top-up. Another type of incentive is what riders call a "bonus" or "diligence fee". For example, one platform offers a weekly bonus to riders who complete their first week of work with a gig acceptance rate of at least 85 per cent.

According to the interviewed riders, incentives change every week. For example, when riders complete a specified number of deliveries, they often receive stickers that accumulate like badges in a video game. If a rider is able to collect enough stickers to upgrade to the VIP level, which one platform calls the "hero" class, they unlock special incentives, such as an annual bonus. However, successful riders who earn a high income from making deliveries pointed out that they work hard to tackle the new incentives every week, as if deciphering a riddle. While unlocking incentives is not easy for all riders, some of them feel it is fun and challenging to overcome new tasks each week. Scholars studying platform-based work call incentive-based strategies of control and motivation "gamified practices", which affect work cultures by encouraging individuals to seize immediate gratification from their work (Gandini, 2018; Lehdonvirta, 2018).

Nevertheless, labour platforms do not rely only on positive incentives to shape the behaviour of their riders; they also impose penalties when riders do not comply with the rules, which are akin to workplace regulations. Such rules include traffic safety, dress codes (wear a helmet and no sandals) and professional conduct (no smoking while working). Failure to comply means facing imposed penalties that can range from a warning notification to bonus deduction, temporary suspension and permanent suspension. While all labour platforms prefer to regard riders as "partners", platforms actually treat them as subservient workers when enforcing penalties and rules.

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34 The sociologist Michael Burawoy developed the concept of labour process based on Karl Marx's theory that capitalists use various methods to extend the working hours of workers to maximize the extraction of surplus labour. He argued that after the first factory law in England was enacted to limit the length of working days, capitalists adjusted by initiating the piece-rate work to encourage workers to work as much as possible within a limited time (Burawoy, 1979, p. 26). Prior to the enactment of the factory law, the issue of long working hours was the most important problem for the labour movement. Limits on lawful working hours have now laid the foundation for new forms of exploitation and control.

3. Benefits

On-demand food-delivery riders do not access social security benefits because they are generally contracted as independent contractors. Because our researchers were unable to access corporate employment data, it was impossible to draw a clear picture of the scope of the workers' benefits.

For example, one platform publicized that its riders are entitled to motorcycle, accident and life insurance. Nevertheless, it is likely that riders must meet several conditions before they can access such coverage, such as working longer than a specified period, continuously meeting high targets or being promoted to VIP class. Our interviews revealed that riders who work part-time do not have access to accident and life insurance at all. As for the part-time workers, platforms often have no clear policy and require that the riders file a claim for compensation on a case-by-case basis that allows the platforms considerable discretion.

Employment arrangement	Rider choice: time commitment	Rider choice: place	Example of benefits
Full-time gig with one labour platform	8 hours and more	Can accept or refuse gigs, but without the ability to choose distance	Entitled to accident insurance after working for longer than six months or to purchase a vehicle or mobile phone with an instalment or loan from a financial institution for partners.
Part-time gig with one labour platform	4–8 hours	After working hours and during weekend	Entitled to partial compensation in case of an accident
Gigs with multiple platforms	Based on availability	Able to accept or refuse gigs based on distance	Not entitled to regular benefits

Chapter 4
Food-delivery riders
and the future of work

In chapter 3, we discussed platform-mediated labour processes that motivate and control food-delivery riders to work as much as possible. In this chapter, we mainly talk about delivery and work procedures from the workers' perspective: working conditions, the opinions of riders to these conditions and their attitudes to the new forms of work. The first section introduces urban cities as the new workplace, where urban conditions determine the pace and methods of work.

In the second section, we describe the skills that riders gain from platform-mediated food delivery. The third section describes rider responses to work processes, the control regime, the piece rate and incentives. We examine the impact of their work, working hours and their daily schedules. Here, the research team found the ironic phenomenon of food-delivery riders not having enough time to eat lunch. In the last two sections, we open up a conversation about the future of work by raising two important issues: the effect of precarity on relationships between riders and the platforms that employ them, and riders' coping strategies and potential collective organization—issues that the research team wants to encourage for further study.

4.1 Working environment

It was around 2.30 p.m. and we had an appointment with a group of on-demand food-delivery riders who regularly meet at a cafe near the central train station, located in the old city of Bangkok. After having worked the whole morning in the summer heat of June, men in bright green and orange uniforms took their rest together and socialized during their late lunch break. They purposefully chose to have a late lunch because normal lunch hours are the peak period of orders, which then subside in the early afternoon.

Motorcyclists wearing bright jackets and helmets have become familiar on Bangkok's streets. This group of food-delivery gig workers have adopted the coffee shop as a break room. As the streets and public spaces become their new workplace, the need for shelter becomes a necessity.

For the riders, the coffee shop serves as a local hub in the area and a meeting place where they can socialize, share experiences and exchange information. Every day, regular riders discuss work-related issues, such as demanding customers, new roadblocks or new shortcuts they have discovered. Other obstacles can be navigating the digital application or dealing with traditional motorcycle taxi drivers whose livelihoods have been greatly impacted by their arrival. Experienced riders also help newcomers figure out the weekly incentives.[35]

When the street is the factory

Labour platforms have shifted the site of work from factory to the street, where distribution becomes integral to the production itself and work takes place anywhere and everywhere. In Bangkok, due to urban and transport planning, workers prefer to use motorcycles for convenience and mobility. Yet, this environment means a high risk of accident and other work hazards. In 2018, the World Health Organization reported that Thailand had the highest rate of death due to car accident in South-East Asia—at 32.7 persons per 100,000 people, with motorcycles having much higher casualties than cars (at 24.3 persons compared with 4 persons per 100,000 people, respectively)[36] In 2018, casualties from road

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35 Interviews with food delivery workers, June 2019.
36 See BBC, "WHO: Road accidents were the most fatal cause of deaths among young people, and Thailand has the highest road death toll in Southeast Asia", BBC, 22 December 2018, www.bbc.com/thai/international-al-46545106.

accidents totalled 20,169, and 71 per cent of them were motorcyclists.[37] One food-delivery rider reflected on the risk of a work-related accident in the heart of Bangkok, especially when traffic and climate are unfavourable:

> *Rainy season is the hardest. With traffic jams, we have to speed up, but we really can't. There is a risk when it rains in the morning and a lot of orders naturally come in. We then have to work with difficulties. There should be hazard pay in the rainy season."*

4.2 Gig work and skills obtained

After successfully passing the application process, a food-delivery worker must adapt to the new form of digitally mediated work. One food-delivery rider explained this experience:

"A gig will pop up on my screen, and I will take a look at the details: destination, the route suggested and traffic conditions. Then I will accept, respond to customers and go to the store to wait, pick up the order, take a picture, deliver it, and call the customer when I arrive. I look at the app to find out how much it pays. I must press complete, then money will go into the account."

As shown by Veen et al (2019), a rider must strictly follow all these steps to complete the delivery. The gig is typically assigned to a particular rider who chooses whether to accept. If the rider chooses to accept the gig, then they must follow all the steps mentioned above—an indicator of the control and command power that employers have over their workers. From the interviews with the food-delivery riders, we noticed that after working for a while, riders get a hang of it because the process is highly repetitive, as the following description of a delivery person working for another platform illustrates:

"The gig shows up and I check the app, look at the map and location of the restaurant. When I arrive, I need to check the menu and verify the order, to make sure it's correct before paying. Then I take the photo of the food and receipt and send them to the centre. I look at the

destination and follow the GPS, collect money and complete the work."

Although the work process is repetitive, navigating digital applications and delivering food on-demand require many indispensable skills: map reading, assessing traffic and travel routes, as well as attention to detail when thoroughly checking orders. In addition, sometimes food-delivery riders must read English-language menus and memorize foreign names with which they are not usually familiar.

Most importantly, riders constantly work under the enormous pressure of time constraints. With a lack of an inadequate support system, they must solve problems by themselves when things go wrong and need a quick fix, whether it be a wrong address or a faulty map. Common mistakes also include orders placed when a store is closed or food being swapped by servers. Therefore, problem-solving is another significant skill. We noticed that experienced food-delivery riders often exhibited natural skills in thoroughness and ingenuity in solving problems. Other skills, such as map reading and navigating restaurant orders, could be a result of learning by doing. After all, labour platforms only provided riders with training on how to use the application.

4.3 Rider responses to piece-rate and incentive schemes

Although labour platforms have distinctive delivery rates and employment arrangements, the most common is the combination of a piece-rate fee and incentives that vary according to the area of work.

From the interviews with the food-delivery riders who gigged with multiple platforms, we summarize three general forms of income composition:

- Around 80 per cent of income comes from piece-rate delivery fees and 20 per cent from incentives or bonuses.
- All 100 per cent of income derives from piece-rate delivery fees.
- Around 70 per cent of income comes from hourly fees and 30 per cent from piece-rate delivery fees.

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37 ibid.

The net income of the interviewed riders generally correlated with the duration of their workday: The longer riders worked, the more income they earned. On average, riders who worked more than eight hours per day delivered about 10–15 orders (generally with distances of fewer than 6 km per delivery.) If riders decide to accept a gig with a long distance, they will earn more income per delivery but achieve fewer deliveries per day.

Therefore, riders' incomes are based on either the number of deliveries or the duration of work (or both simultaneously), affected, in turn, by many factors, such as traffic conditions, the familiarity of riders with the routes taken and the wait periods while food is prepared. Platform-based gig work is constantly a race with time, as one food-delivery rider explained:

> *I deliver passengers between 7 a.m. and 10 a.m., then food between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. I rest after 2 p.m. and resume at 5 p.m. I have to constantly calculate the time required for each gig. Say, if a restaurant is crowded, I have to decide whether to wait in a queue of 10 people or cancel right away. It depends on the situation onsite. Accepting all gigs will not guarantee more earnings. It depends on whether I'll choose a diamond (an incentive) or choose to maximize my delivery. My options are, first, to focus on direct earnings from the delivery, say, 50 baht or 100 baht. It means I only count on deliveries but don't collect any diamonds. Or second, I count on diamonds or incentives. I have to up my game. From 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., say, the application gives away 10 diamonds.... I won't sit back and deliver only passengers because delivering food earns 20 diamonds while delivering passengers earns only 10 diamonds. We need to be streetwise. All of this takes skill and experience."*

One group of food-delivery riders we talked with shared their insight that they earn the least bonus money if they work on all three types of services offered by the platform: food, passengers and parcel delivery. Instead, riders earn the highest bonus when choosing just one service. Yet, it is not that easy to beat the system. Once they choose to deliver food, they encounter other challenges.

The terms of incentives change every week, and riders are lured into being constantly preoccupied with the incentive scheme. In fact, the incentive schemes that appeared on each rider's application were all different. Riders explained that the incentives they received depend on several factors, such as the type of delivery carried out and the rate of acceptance. They revealed that their relatively high income, compared to general food-delivery riders, did not come naturally. Instead, they strategically choose gigs with favourable conditions that maximize the incentive. For example, restaurants must be popular, in an accessible location but without a long queue or too many riders competing for the gig.

To beat the system, their strategy had to change every week too. Not only was this fast-paced change a source of stress, it involved making constant mental notes. For example, which neighbourhoods have both a high concentration of restaurants and a short distance from common delivery locations? Food-delivery riders also understood that there were many factors out of their control, such as traffic and weather conditions, as well as contingent situations, such as fussy customers. Therefore, an on-demand food-delivery gig can be characterized by high pressure and considerable stress. Benefits of regularly meeting in groups go beyond brainstorming and sharing information about the internal logic behind incentives. Socializing with each other helps relieve them of excessive stress and pressure.

The impact of the piece-rate and incentive schemes

The people we interviewed said that riders who work hard and know how to work wisely can make a lot of money. They summarized that there are three groups of riders, based on earnings. The group with the higher incomes comprises those who gig full-time every day, with an average income of 1,000–2,000 baht per day and some days as high as 3,000 baht. They can make between 40,000 baht and 60,000 baht a month. The middle-income group accounts for the majority of riders, with income between 20,000 baht and 30,000 baht per month. And the third group, which is the part-time riders, earn around 5,000–6,000 baht monthly.

The intensity of work has a direct impact on riders' use of speed and their work fatigue. A report on road accidents of Thai industrial workers confirmed that "[delivery

workers] must work against time, resulting in accidents from using speed and [due to] fatigue" (Road Safety Center, 2018). For food-delivery workers, fatigue from long working hours is also associated with accidents outside of work—an issue largely neglected by official reports of industrial accidents. Riders told us about a member in their group who had died in a road accident while driving home after work.

Due to the nature of gig work, akin to outsourcing, food-delivery riders are left to be the sole responsible party for uncontrollable factors, such as climate and traffic conditions, and market factors, such as competition and fluctuating orders. As discussed in the previous chapter, labour platforms only provide most riders with limited insurance coverage, even though an accident can jeopardize a rider's livelihood or life. Due to their increasing concern over safety issues, some organizations have already started to demand preventive measures for people working in this industry, as exemplified in a news report advocating for adequate accident coverage for riders:

💬 *The doctor...went on to say that platforms should work to reduce the risk of road accidents for this group of people. For example, when the service provider is a big company with many branches, there should be a management system [that limits] riders' areas of work. Each rider must not work for long distances, so there is no need to work with haste. Moreover, the pay system should not mainly focus on the number of trips. There should at least be a base salary to reduce the pressure on riders from rushing. Beyond that base, riders could get an extra delivery fee. In addition, companies should provide equipment that helps reduce the risk to employees. For example, they know that employees have to contact customers to arrange the location of delivery. The safest way is to finalize the route details and time before employees leave the location. But in the end, if they have to search for the spot again while riding on the road, at least there should be headphones and microphones provided so employees can talk with customers without having to hold the phone."* [38]

As of November 2019 in Thailand, we began to see news of major platforms reducing delivery fees and incentives, a trend previously seen in China. Food-delivery riders were upset and mobilized to protest in many provinces, such as Khon Kaen, Udon Thani, Nakorn Ratchasima and Pattaya. A video published by a local news organization on social media captured a group of food-delivery riders in Udon Thani Province explaining that the company's reduction of delivery fees lowered their daily income from around 1,000 baht to 400 baht. After fuel costs are deducted, they end up with less than the legal minimum wage rate, they argued. Moreover, the company had modified the fees without consulting the riders, giving only one-day notice. As a result of the changes, riders had to deliver food for greater distances and face greater risks.

The protest in Udon Thani suggests that riders are highly aware and critical of how certain costs (for example, the depreciation of vehicles) and risks have been unloaded onto them. However, some riders expressed in the video that they did not want the company to provide accident insurance but prefer the previous system of higher pay and other incentives. This is because most riders are already entitled to some level of accident insurance coverage under their vehicle tax certification.

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38 "Doctor concerned for injuries and death of the "two-wheeled fast horse" career,» Naewna newspaper, 8 May 2019, www.naewna.com/local/412407.

Riders in protest

Representatives of the food-delivery riders who gathered at the Yamo Monument, Nakorn Ratchasima Province to protest the fee cut on 5 November 2019 as interviewed by local media.

Rider 1: *"We're mobilized to show Grab that riders and partners are impacted by the [fee cut] policy. We understand that the company must survive; the company needs to let us survive, too. The thing is, since yesterday, 4 Nov. [2019], the delivery fee is [cut down to] around 30 baht. We can't survive like this. … Also, I met customers and learned that now Grab increased the customer charges from 1 to 10 baht, reducing the orders for the whole Korat Province. When customers put in fewer orders, it worsens our situations."*

Rider 2: *"Some folks bought a brand-new motorcycle for this gig in particular. Not a few but most of them. Before this, they normally start around 8 o'clock (morning) to 9 o'clock (evening), earning around 700–800 baht per day. But for 300 baht as for now, yesterday, we hardly made the minimum wage. This doesn't cover gas bills and we even worked over 10 hours."*

Note: In November 2019, Grab food-delivery riders in many provinces, such as Nakhon Ratchasima, Khon Kaen and Udon Thani, assembled to protest against the reduction in delivery fees. See www.77kaoded.com/content/986083; and www.banmuang.co.th/news/region/169111?fbclid=IwAR2E-oVAB-Y17vV3ya8BUMLljqih9R6ah YF3iKb3O5LCOA2rOw8OQXweQfM.

4.4 Working hours and rest time

Our interviews with riders revealed information that conflicts with the image of a happy and modern workforce that platform companies try to cultivate. On average, food-delivery riders tend to have longer working hours per day than a typical full-time job. Most of the interviewed riders said that they work eight or more hours a day. Those who chose to work between two and three hours a day often do so on top of full-time day work. During our in-depth interviews, one group of riders reported that they work an average of 10–11 hours a day, whereas some riders who are determined to earn more income work up to 12 hours a day every day without a day off.

Under the low piece rates, riders are naturally motivated to make as many deliveries as possible, as one rider explained:

" *I deliver food between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m., then go back to rest in my dormitory. I leave again at 5 p.m. and work until 10 p.m. If I go back to rest in the dormitory, I can make up to 10 rounds of deliveries almost every day, including Saturday and Sunday, when I finish at 5 o'clock. I make a daily income of 600–700 baht, but if I also pick up passengers in the early morning, I can make 1,000 baht. If I am really diligent, I might make up to 30,000 baht per month."*

However, piece-rate delivery fees tend to decrease over time due to increasing competition in the market or platform companies reducing subsidies. To achieve the same income, riders tend to work even longer hours. As already discussed, the longer that riders are on the road, the greater is the chance of an accident. A rider described experiencing health problems from long workdays:

> *I have to make a strategic plan on how I should go about it in the morning, afternoon and evening, for an average of 10 hours per day. Do it every day, and you'll have burning eyes and a sore nose. It will be difficult to depend on it in the long run because I might get sick. I cannot be on the road every day for 10 hours a day. I'd prefer to be a permanent employee."*

In the age of the digital revolution, it is a pity that the technological advancements that spawned the platform economy have brought back the working conditions of the industrial age—when workers had to work on average 10–12 hours a day to obtain a basic level of income. It may not be an exaggeration to say that the platform-based work fits within an industrial revolution paradigm in that it is still largely unregulated and beyond the scope of legal protection.

Riders' belated lunchtime

It is ironic that late meals or not being able to eat on time is a problem cited by most riders. This issue simply reflects the fact that food-delivery riders must work non-stop. One rider emphasized the lack of time to rest:

> *Before I leave home, I stuff myself with food. Once I start the day, I constantly drive around delivering food, and I don't have time to eat. Sometimes, when I'm hungry and want to stop by a restaurant with delicious noodles, I have to skip it because an order pops up on my screen. I accept it and put aside my meal."*

Platform-based workers often do not know what will come next if they reject a gig. Digitally mediated gig work coerces riders to seek immediate gratification:

> *[We] cannot eat on time because of the situation. Say, you are at a restaurant with a long wait. You have to adapt to the situation. Like, sometimes you are waiting for 20 orders. That's why I choose to eat first [before working]. Wasting less time means more income."*

Food-delivery riders must grapple with a high degree of uncertainty while delivering food. For example, they might have to wait a long time for orders or receive many orders all at once, whereas an unexpectedly long wait prompts

riders to rush while making other delivery trips. Both situations potentially reduce the time they have to make other deliveries that day. As a result, riders often prioritize gig work while it is available rather than taking a break.

As with adequate rest time, meals are important to rejuvenate energy and replenish labour power.[39] Sufficient time for meals and rest should be a fundamental right. In fact, because Thai law states that every establishment must allow workers to enjoy meals on a daily basis, we argue that platform-based gig workers have lower working standards than required under the labour laws.

A case study from abroad
Terminating the "30-minute pizza delivery guarantee": The role of social movements in ensuring the safety of workers in the Republic of Korea

Like their peers elsewhere, food-delivery workers in the Republic of Korea face precarious working situations without the protection of trade unions. The campaign to end "30-minute guaranteed delivery" schemes in the country is a good example of how collaboration among social movements can generate public support through the use of social media and creative links between labour rights and issues of consumer social responsibility. Activists achieved their campaign goals when they successfully mobilized disparate social groups to advocate together for policy change with a private company, even without the intervention of state agencies.

Data from the Korea Occupational Safety and Health Agency shows that, between 2005 and 2009, around 5,000 motorcycle delivery workers were injured in road accidents. The number had been continuously increasing over a 10-year period. Because most of those delivery workers were youth who worked part-time over a short period, they were not registered in the social security system and therefore did not receive compensation for their injuries. In addition, it was difficult to expect trade

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39 Karl Marx, Capital, Volume One, First Vintage Book Edition, New Left Review (1977), p. 275.

unions to take a role in protecting the health and safety of these workers because the workers were not union members.

Three major organizations—the Youth Community Union, the Korean Federation of Private Service Workers' Unions (KFSWU) and the Wonjin Institute for Occupational and Environmental Health—campaigned over the case of a 24-year-old Pizza Hut delivery rider who died from delivering pizza in haste.

The Youth Community Union organized a press conference demanding the end to the company's policy of guaranteeing that pizzas are delivered within 30 minutes. It used the slogan: "Abolish the 30-minute delivery guarantee that kills young workers" and was joined by the KFSWU and the South Korea Labour Council as well as the Pizza Hut Union. The joint campaign used Twitter and Facebook to demand that the pizza company in the Republic of Korea cancel the practice of guaranteeing fast pizza delivery and provide safety equipment to workers. The campaign also encouraged consumers to boycott companies that have a similar guaranteed fast-delivery policy.

The campaign was ignited after a 19-year-old delivery worker was fatally hit by a bus. The three organizations mobilized a public petition and online protests via Twitter until Pizza Hut Company announced the cancellation of the 30-minute guaranteed-delivery policy, also prompting other pizza companies to provide safety equipment for their pizza delivery workers ahead of a scheduled pizza boycott.

The campaign shows that social movements led by a broad coalition of labour rights organizations in touch with consumers and the general public can create a strong social force to effect change.

Source: Ji-Eun Park 1 and Myoung-Hee Kim, "Roles of social movement organizations for securing workers' safety in Korea: A case study of abolition of the 30-minute delivery guarantee program in pizza delivery service", International Journal of Health Services, vol. 46, No. 3 (2016), pp. 483–500.

4.5 Uncertainty, precariousness and new relationships with work

As the previous sections show, the nature of the platform-mediated work is based on uncertainty and transparency. Given low piece-rates, workers must work extended hours to reach a desired level of income. The riders we interviewed work an average of eight hours a day for six days a week to attain 20,000–30,000 baht a month. They must do gig work for more than 10 hours a day if they work six days a week, along with three to four extra hours on the seventh day of the week if they want a monthly income of 40,000 baht or more. However, riders do not have any guarantee of earnings. As the rider protests in Thailand indicate, food-delivery riders have begun to voice their concerns about cuts in delivery fees as well as decreasing gig assignments (a result, according to riders, of unlimited recruitment).

On the macro level, a clear example of market-induced uncertainty is illustrated by a series of food-delivery platform closures, such as Honestbee,[40] which announced its shutdown and mass layoffs in Thailand after only a few years in business. Of course, when the labour platforms fail in the market, gig workers often do not get any form of compensation or severance.

In this regard, platform-based food-delivery riders often work with anxiety over the uncertainty of job security. Although they may not be able to address the precariousness of gig work, riders try to lower the risk of unemployment within the scope of their own ability, such as by diversifying or working with multiple platforms simultaneously. As one rider explained:

> *We work with multiple apps to stretch out the risk because we don't know when our service will be suspended."*

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40 "Following the neighbors, Honestbee announced temporary business suspension starting August 22", https://brandinside.asia/honestbee-suspended-operations-in-thailand/.

Our research suggests that platform-based workers are quite diverse in their risk mitigation strategies. For example, within the same group of riders, we found the following arrangements:

Rider 1: delivers food for only one platform.
Rider 2: delivers food for one platform and deliver passengers for another platform.
Rider 3: delivers passengers for only one platform.

All three riders work under distinctive incentive schemes. For example, while rider 2 was gigging for a new player that had just entered the market, rider 3 worked as both a traditional motorcycle taxi driver and as a gig rider delivering passengers.

4.6 Riders' loyalty and the future

Diversifying or simultaneously working with multiple platforms has interesting impacts on the identity of riders. Despite the volatile nature of gig work and insecure wages, many riders identify with the platforms they work for. Some riders have even toyed with the idea that this sort of work could be their long-term career. In our interviews, riders often talked about platforms in a way that showed complex or mixed feelings of allegiance and resentment. Although the gig system allows platform companies to cut them loose, these riders strictly followed the platform's instructions much like the traditional salaried workers.

Meanwhile, their peers delivering for traditional businesses in the food and restaurant sector are also being affected by the rise of platform-based gig work. As mentioned before, restaurant chains and major franchises have adapted by laying off their delivery workers and outsourcing delivery work to the platform companies.[41] As a result, platform-based gigs have increasingly replaced traditional secure jobs and made precariousness the new norm. All of these issues raise a concerning question: What will happen to the food-delivery riders (and gig workers in general) in the long term?

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41 Interview with a trade union leader of a major fast-food chain.

4.7 Self-organizing and collective action

We found that gig riders have formed mutual support groups for a couple of reasons. First, self-organizing activities respond to tension or conflict with incumbents: traditional motorcycle taxi drivers who feel they are losing their livelihood because of newcomers. For example, during the first years after Uber and other platforms were introduced in Thailand, conflict sometimes escalated into physical violence. We interviewed the president of a group of riders in Bangkok who was chosen by approximately 500 members largely to act as a representative to negotiate with motorcycle taxi drivers during times of conflict. According to him:

> Mostly, it [violent encounters] was a result of incidents with motorcycle taxi drivers, such as the Asoke case, which resulted in irreconcilable conflict. My role is to negotiate with them when there is an argument. "

Second, akin to Ford and Honan's "mutual aid" organizing approach, gig riders in Bangkok have formed what they call "recreational groups"—spaces in which riders socialize, exchange information and fundraise for members who have been in an accident and are injured or died. When studying self-organizing activities of platform-based food-delivery workers in Indonesia, Ford and Honan (2019) found a similar phenomenon: Indonesian gig workers who have self-organized and formed informal and grass-roots communities around their work area. The authors argued that this mutual aid approach lies outside the framework of the traditional labour relations system. Nevertheless, we found that the negotiation or mediation roles of the group could deepen or develop. The group president we interviewed described the bargaining power of riders through the company:

> There were occasions in which we mobilized riders. After we successfully negotiated with the other side, the company seemed to listen to us. The more people we mobilized, the more the company was willing to accept our request. We have a place at the table now that we can mobilize riders. This is a good example for the young riders.... We just proposed accident insurance benefits and compensation for sick and recovery time to the company. We also expressed our opposition against cuts to incentives. "

Group leaders in Bangkok have progressively taken on roles similar to labour representatives who negotiate with platform companies on issues ranging from pay and incentives to compensation related to injuries and accidents.

Driver communities	Driver associations	Unions
Membership based on employment and locality	Membership based on employment	Membership based on employment
Predominantly mutual aid logic	Predominantly servicing logic	Predominantly servicing logic
Activity: - ad hoc mobilization - social services - emergency response	Activity: - legal enactment - negotiation - collective action - entrepreneurial activity	Activity: - legal enactment - collective bargaining - industrial action
No institutional capacity	Limited institutional capacity	Greater institutional capacity
High member participation	Moderate member participation	Moderate member participation

Source: Ford and Honan, 2019.

Although riders normally perform jobs separately and compete among themselves, their self-organizing activities have raised their status as a group and increased their bargaining power. Nevertheless, labour platforms generally operate with a highly centralized structure in which all the decision-making power lies at the headquarters, without local supervisors and managers. In this regard, riders often face challenges in directing their grievances and getting their voices heard: They do not always know to whom they should address grievances and demands. The riders remarked that communication with the platform company is "like one-way communication". There is no feedback mechanism or process for communicating information back to the riders. They see that their relationship with the platform company involves "communication with the wall".

In this context, we want to raise significant concerns about the need for institutional mechanisms in which riders' grievances can be voiced to platforms. Ford and Honan (2019) also argued that informal organizing can more actively mobilize riders than associations or even trade unions. They also recognized major limitations when such groups lack the institutional capacity to bring about structural change. We strongly agree that such limitations exist in the context of Thailand. Most importantly, because most riders have a background in the informal economy,

members of informal recreational groups are generally unfamiliar with labour rights and the labour relations framework. There is a dire need to provide platform workers with information about the labour laws, their legal rights and benefits.

One important observation here is the sheer similarity between Indonesian and Thai informal groups, especially how they seem to have emerged out of necessity. Riders in both places need a mechanism to voice their demands regarding wages, which are being undermined by two common factors: an increase in the numbers of riders being employed by platforms and reductions in benefits provided by the company.

We think that self-organizing activities and informal groups are a first and important step towards cross-sector solidarity because they allow riders to experience both the benefits of mutual support and challenges in terms of collective actions. We encourage national labour movements and local labour organizations to reach out to such groups and collaborate to find a singular framework that connects workers inside and outside the traditional labour relations regime. Doing so will not only strengthen the protection of gig workers but also keep the labour movement abreast of new forms of challenges.

Chapter 5
Policy recommendations

Based on suggestions from the people we interviewed, we propose the following recommendations that cover issues of rider employment status, health and safety, responsibility and accountability of platform companies, and rider associations and freedom of collective bargaining.

1. Rider status

1.1 Relevant labour laws, especially the Labour Protection Act, must be revisited and revised to keep pace with the changing forms of work. Platform-based food-delivery work exemplifies the emergence of new relationships in which direct interactions between employers and employees are being replaced by digitally mediated interactions. The laws need to take such changing relationships seriously. One relevant model is the California Assembly Bill 5 signed by the California Assembly in September 2019. To do so, regulators must understand the functioning of new work processes that use information technology and algorithms to control workers.

1.2 Platform companies should recognize their responsibility towards riders and accordingly modify their legal status so that they gain access to legal protections under the labour protection laws, such as the minimum wage, social security benefits (paid leave and termination severances) and insurance.

2. Health and safety

2.1 Organizations working to promote health and safety at work, including state, private sector and civil society organizations, should collaborate to update the relevant regulations and guidelines so that adequate training and safety equipment are provided for all riders. Road accidents are a critical and urgent issue. Preventive and awareness-raising campaigns aimed at platform companies and consumers should also be prioritized.

2.2 Laws should also require the platform company to invest in the construction of roadside shelters and resting places or require platform companies to contribute taxes to local government for the construction of such infrastructure.

3. Responsibility and accountability of platform companies

3.1 The revision of labour laws should directly address the imbalance of power between platform companies and riders. Under revised laws, platform companies should be regulated in terms of both labour relations and social responsibility. There should also be new areas of responsibility envisaged in light of the changing nature of work. Platform companies should encourage all riders to register with the social security system and facilitate access to legal and social benefits.

3.2 New laws should require platform companies to increase their transparency and accountability to riders. For example, companies should provide riders with adequate records and explanations regarding procedures of gig assignment, performance assessment, rewards and penalties.

4. Rider associations and freedom of collective bargaining

Related labour organizations (such as trade unions in the food, restaurant and transportation sectors as well as informal worker networks) should initiate projects to support and promote the collectivism of platform workers. Our research shows that food-delivery riders have both the need and the potential to scale up and strengthen their collective bargaining power. This is an opportunity to proactively work with riders who are already self-organized as informal groups by offering technical expertise and education resources.

5. Other issues

State agencies related to data collection, such as the National Statistical Office, should initiate a systematic survey of road accidents based on occupation, cross-analysed with other demographics, such as sex and age. The Accident and Road Safety Agency in the Republic of Korea can provide a good model. The database will be invaluable for policymaking and installing preventive measures to reduce road accidents involving food-delivery workers.

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